



Sharing books with Preschoolers, the Hanen Way

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Preschoolers (aged 2 ½ to 5 years) enjoy books in many different ways. Some may want you to read their favourite story book from beginning to end. Some may just want to flip quickly through the pages. Some may try to “read” the book to you, pointing out pictures of interest or reciting memorized words or lines from the story. All of these are positive ways to share books together. What’s most important is that your child enjoys looking at books with you and that the experience leads to conversation and interaction between you and your child

When reading with a preschooler, the main goals include:

1. Encouraging their interest in books and in sharing them with you
2. Learning about new words, ideas and concepts, especially those that broaden their understanding of their world and stimulate their imagination
3. Understanding and enjoying stories
4. Having fun!

Types of books to read with a preschooler:

- **Repetitive books** – younger preschoolers may enjoy books with predictable, rhythmic language that repeats throughout the book. The language and repetition in these books will catch your child’s interest and make it easier to remember important words and sentences. Examples of repetitive books: “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?” by Bill Martin Jr., “Goodnight Moon” by Margaret Wise Brown, or “Hand, Hand, Fingers, Thumb” by Al Perkins.
- **Homemade books** – which could include photos of favourite people or things, or objects or remnants from outings or interesting places they have been (such as a birthday party or a trip to the zoo). See “Make a Book” at the end of this article for more ideas.
- **Simple storybooks with a main character or a main event** - the story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. An example would be “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” by Eric Carle. The story of the Three Little Pigs is another example of a simple story which has a repetitive structure, making it easier for your child to follow along and understand the story. If your child isn’t interested in listening to the whole story at first, simplify it, or just talk about the pictures.
- **Non-Fiction books** – non-fiction books about interesting topics such as animals, occupations or how things work will expose your child to new vocabulary and provide new topics for conversation.

Books to avoid:

- **Lengthy, complicated storybooks, especially those without lots of illustrations** - these types of books often involve an understanding of more complex language than your child may be ready for (especially younger preschoolers). And if there aren't enough pictures to explain the story, your child may have a difficult time following along
- **Electronic books** – In a study comparing an e-book with the same story in a paper book version, researchers found that children learned more from the paper book [1]. The buttons and games in the e-book distracted the children's attention from the story. [Read more about this study.](#)

How to share books with a preschooler

- **Let your child choose the book** – it's okay to make suggestions from time to time, but allowing your child to choose the book you read ensures that your child is truly interested.
- **Let your child hold the book and turn the pages** – children love to be actively involved and to have some control over the book reading. Don't worry if they skip some pages – the goal is to make the book an enjoyable experience and reading every page isn't a "must" at this stage.
- **Let your child "read" the book in their own way** – some children look at a few pages or flip through the book for a few moments. Others want to look at the entire book. Let your child look at the book at their own pace and according to their interests. You don't have to finish the whole book at one sitting!
- **It's okay to change things up!** – you don't have to read every word on the page. You can simplify the story, or just talk about the pictures and not read the words.
- **It's okay to keep things the same!** – some children love to look at the same book over and over again. There's no need to discourage this. The repetition and familiarity helps your child learn new words and better understand the concepts within the book.
- **Wait** – for your child to do or say something. After you have either turned the page or read one page, wait silently and avoid asking questions or pointing out anything particular on that page. Your goal is to give your child an opportunity to express herself and take turns with you.
- **Try acting it out** – once a story is familiar to your child, they may enjoy acting out the story with actions or props. For example, if they enjoy a story about a baby bird learning to fly, you could pretend to flap your wings as you learn to "fly" around the living room with your child.

Once you've found a book your child likes and you are taking turns talking about the book, you can Add Language that will stimulate your child's vocabulary, understanding, and thinking skills (It Takes Two to Talk® - A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays. Pepper & Weitzman, 2004).

"Adding Language" means:

- **use a variety of words** – try to avoid just naming the pictures in the book as this will result in your child being exposed to mostly nouns (names of things). While nouns are important, your

child also needs to be exposed to words that describe (e.g. “messy”, “sticky”, “enormous”), action words (“climb”, “fly”, “yell”, “see”), words for feelings (“grumpy”, “excited”, “tired”), location words (“beside”, “under”, “through”), words about time (“soon”, “later”, “after”), etc.

- **highlight important words** – emphasize the most important words (the ones that are key to your child understanding the information on the page) with your voice, slowing down, and showing a picture in the book which demonstrates the meaning of the word. Repeat these new words often when talking about the story and in everyday life. This will help your child remember these new words and possibly begin to use them himself.
- **expand your child’s message** – when your child says something about the book, you can respond by elaborating on his message. For example, if they say “there’s a frog” while pointing to a picture of a frog jumping between lily pads, you can expand by saying “Yes, the frog is jumping on the lily pads!” Adding on to your child’s idea shows your child how to produce longer sentences and gives their more information about the topic.
- **build your child’s understanding** – your child will gain a better understanding of their experiences and their world when you draw connections between the book and their life. For example, if you look at a book about a trip to the doctor, you can talk about a recent visit your child had to the doctor.
- **build your child’s imagination** - books offer a great opportunity to add language that introduces imaginary concepts to your child. Talking about topics like castles, ghosts, or pirates that your child cannot experience in “real life” helps to build your child’s language, play, and thinking skills.
- **go beyond the “here-and-now”** – go beyond the pages of the book to generate discussions with your child that will expand their thinking. You can help your child predict what might happen (eg. “What do you think will happen when the wolf tries to blow down the brick house?”), compare and contrast (eg. “That dog is really small, just like your friend Jane’s dog”), talk about feelings (eg. “That boy can’t find his ball. He looks sad”), and make connections with their experiences (eg. “Remember when you lost your doll and you felt sad?”). These ways of talking encourage your child to think, solve problems, and imagine.

Make a Book

A homemade book, created especially for your child, is sure to become one of your child’s favourites. By following these guidelines, you will create a book together that will be interactive and fun:

- **Think about your child’s favourite things and outings** – items can include photos of favourite people or things, packages or labels from favourite foods or toys (eg. part of the Rice Krispies box), or photos or small remnants from interesting places or outings (eg. a ticket stub from a show, a stone collected from the playground, a photo of your child getting a haircut or swimming in the lake, etc). If you follow your child’s lead and observe their interests, you will know exactly what to include in the book.
- **Involve your child** – your child can help you select pictures or objects, help you paste the pictures into the book, and tell you what to write on the page underneath the picture.

- **Ensure that the written words make sense to your child** – when your child is the one who decides what to write on each page, you can be sure that the text is from their perspective and at their level.

If you follow the guidelines above when you share books with your preschooler, you will probably notice that your child:

- enjoyed sharing books with you
- paid attention for longer than usual
- communicated back and forth with you so that the two of you had a conversation
- started making connections between books and their own experiences
- incorporated themes from their books into their pretend play

Please [send us feedback](#) on this activity.

Endnotes

1. de Jong, M. & Bus, A. (2002). Quality of book-reading matters for emergent readers: An experiment with the same book in a regular or electronic format. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(1), 145-155.

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children's lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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